

EDUCATIONAL DEPARTMENT



The
BEAUTY QUEEN *of* LEENANE

BY MARTIN McDONAGH

DIRECTED BY JUDITH SWIFT

sandra feinstein-

GAM
theatre

STUDY GUIDE

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*This study guide was prepared by
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Prologue

Dear Educator,

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre is pleased to offer you this study guide to share with your students designed to prepare them for our production of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* by Martin McDonagh.

This Study Guide is broken into five acts. In the first act, you will find a few more reminders for you and your students about the nature of performance and what is expected of all audience members attending the theatre. In the second act, you will find a biography of Martin McDonagh, a description of The Leenane Trilogy and breakdown of the characters. In act three, we list who is involved in our production and then *Beauty Queen* Director, Judith Swift, articulate her vision and ideas behind our production. Finally, Act four examines the dominant themes in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and includes questions for discussion. At the end of our study guide, you will be able to find information on how to learn more about The Gamm's Educational offerings.

As part of our Core Prep program, I would like to offer a workshop with your classroom/school before your visit and help prepare your students for the play. In these workshops, I will not only discuss the play and our production concept(s), but we will also get students out of their seats and up on their feet engaging in the themes, motifs and the language of the play. This type of kinesthetic engagement with language and literature ensures students deep comprehension and the sort of text-to-self connection that encourages students to invest in reading and literacy-learning.

Much of this work was discovered, developed and inspired by the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University. I had the good fortune to work with "ArtsLit" and the strategies and models for learning developed by the organization continue to serve as a foundational pedagogical tool for all Gamm Education programming.

Some benefits of ArtsLiteracy learning include:

- **Community Building in Your Classroom** (Applied Learning New Standards: A1; A2; A5)

- **Inspiration and Background on the Artist** (English Language Arts New Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5; E6; Applied Learning New Standards: A2; A3; A5)
- **Entering and Comprehending Text** (English Language Arts Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5)
- **Creating Text for Performance** (English Language Arts Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5)
- **Performing in Your Class** (Applied Learning Standards: A1; A2; A3; A4; A5)
- **Reflecting on Your Performance** (E2; E3; A1; A2; A5)

Moreover, the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) has developed GSE's (Grade Span Expectations) and GLE's (Grade Level Expectations) to help "capture the "big ideas" of reading that can be assessed."

We believe that all of our Literacy through Performance work helps to develop the following literacy skills.

WRITING

- W-2: Writing in Response to Literary Text (showing understanding of ideas in a text). A "text" covers not only books and plays, but film and other kinds of media.
- W-3: Making Analytical judgments about text (how good was it? What stuck out?)
- W-4: Creating a Storyline
- W-5: Applying Narrative Strategies (how did they tell the story?)
- W-14: Reflective Essay

ORAL COMMUNICATION

- OC-1: Interactive Listening (how well students listen; how much information they pick up hearing something once – asking a student to write a comprehensive account of a play certainly works)
- OC-2: Making Presentations (each senior in Rhode Island will be asked to put on a senior exhibition, capstone project or portfolio that includes a public demonstration on a particular subject. Learning about public performance is an obvious tie-in).

READING

- R-4: Initial Understanding of Literary Texts (where is the climax in a story? How would you set this play in contemporary society?)
- R-5: Analysis and Interpretation of Literary Text/Citing Evidence

- R-11: Reading Fluency and Accuracy (part of the benefits of reading a script out over and over in rehearsal is an increase in reading fluency and accuracy)

Furthermore, attending a production addresses several Common Core Standards in Reading: Literature Standards, Speaking and Listening Standards, and, of course, Theatre Arts Standards in Aesthetic Judgment, Cultural Contexts, and Communication.

Please see more exercise and strategies for ArtsLiteracy learning at www.artslit.org. We would love to hear from you about your experiences using this study guide. It is a great help to us as we build on our education program from year to year.

Steve Kidd
Resident Actor/Education Director
The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre

ACT I: Theatre Audience Etiquette

What is so exciting about attending the theatre - especially in a smaller space such as the Gamm - is that it is live! Live theatre is different from other forms of entertainment; unlike film and television you are encouraged to pay close attention and actively engage your imagination.

You are mere feet (and sometimes inches!) away from the actors. Thus, you the audience, play an active role in the experience. The actors can see and hear you and any distracting behavior (talking, text messaging, unwrapping candy, the ringing of cell phones, etc) can affect the actor's concentration, disrupt the performance, and ruin the experience for other audience members. So we ask that you refrain from talking or making any noise during a performance. Thank you!

The Nature of Performance

Controversial British playwright Sarah Kane once observed: "There's always going to be a relationship between the material and that audience that you don't really get with a film... People can walk out or change channels or whatever, it doesn't make any difference to the performance... It's a completely reciprocal relationship between the play and the audience."

The performance you see will never be precisely the same, for it will never have the same audience; every performance is unique. Theatre scholar Robert Cohen observed the essential paradox of live performance:

- It is unique to the moment, yet it is repeatable.
- It is spontaneous, yet it is rehearsed.
- It is participatory, yet it is presented.
- It is real, yet it is simulated.
- The actors are themselves, yet they are characters.
- The audience is involved, yet it remains apart.

“Theatre is not just another genre, one among many. It is the only genre in which, today and every day, now and always, living human beings address and speak to other human beings... It is a place for human encounter, a space for authentic human existence...”

-Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic and Playwright
(From Robert Cohen's *Theatre: Brief Version*)

Discuss with your students the particular demands and benefits of attending a live performance. Perhaps have them brainstorm how theatre is different from film, television and sporting events.

ACT II: Martin McDonagh and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*



About Martin McDonagh:

Martin McDonagh is an Irish playwright, filmmaker and screenwriter born in March of 1970 in Camberwell, London, England to Irish parents. Despite living in London his entire life, McDonagh is considered to be one of the most important living Irish playwrights.

His first six plays are separated into two trilogies: The Leenane Trilogy, consisting of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara*, and *The Lonesome West*. His second trilogy consists of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Banshees of Inisherin*, the last of which was never published. Both trilogies take place in and around County Galway where he spent his childhood vacations.

The Pillowman, McDonagh's first non-Irish play premiered at the National Theatre in 2003. He has also written prize winning radio plays, including *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter*. His newest play, *A Behanding in Spokane*, a play about a killer looking for the hand he lost in his youth, premiered in New York in 2010. Christopher Walken, the lead actor was nominated for a Tony Award for his performance.

McDonagh recently switched his focus to film. In 2006, he won an Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film for *Six Shooter*. In 2008 he wrote and directed his first full-length feature, *In Bruges* and received an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay and a BAFTA Award for Best Original Screenplay. His latest film, *Seven Psychopaths* came out in October 2012.

About The Leenane Trilogy:

The Beauty Queen of Leenane, written in 1996 and receiving six Tony Award nominations, winning four, is the story of the dysfunctional relationship between a spinster and her domineering mother. The spinster faces her last chance at love and her mother faces a rather grim end.

A Skull in Connemara, written in 1997 is the story of a Connemara man, Mick Dowd that has the job of exhuming skeletons in an overcrowded graveyard. His newest customer is his wife, whom he was accused of killing years before.

The Lonesome West, also written in 1997 was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play in 1999. It tells the story of two bickering brothers, Coleman and Valene Connor, in the aftermath of a supposedly accidental fatal shooting of their father. The Gamm staged *The Lonesome West* during Season 21 in 2006.

Some of the characters from the other two plays are mentioned in *Beauty Queen* as a way to link the stories and the town in which they take place.

Characters and Setting

The Beauty Queen of Leenane takes place in Leenane, a small town in Connemara, County Galway.

Maureen Folan, *aged forty*

Mag Folan, *her mother*

Pato Dooley, *about forty*

Ray Dooley, *his brother, about twenty*

ACT III: Our Production

Who Made It Happen:

On Stage:

Maureen Folan	Jeanine Kane
Mag Folan	Wendy Overly
Pato Dooley	Steve Kidd
Ray Dooley	Joe Short

Behind The Scenes:

Directed by Judith Swift
Set Design by Patrick Lynch
Costume Design by Amanda Downing Carney
Lighting Design by David Roy
Stage Management by Jessica Hill
Dialect Coach, Wendy Overly

Production Notes:

Directors' Notes: Of Scepters and Jewels

By Judith Swift, Director of The Beauty Queen of Leenane

For those of us with only a nodding acquaintance of the downtrodden Irish under the jackbooted rule of English overlords and a willingness to chuckle at the notion of clerical child abuse more linked to rulers over knuckles than pedophilic rapists over helpless children, McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* may seem more comically mythic than real. And truth be told, who wouldn't prefer the brochure image of Ireland — its bucolic hillsides dotted with cozy cottages inhabited by comely colleens and yarn-spinning crones with second sight?

But McDonagh insists that we choke on the smoke of the peat fires and fill our bellies from the trough of ignorance and poverty made legacy by generations of suffering and deprivation. In the land of Synge and Yeats, of Joyce and O'Casey, Irish television is rife with Australian imports and the lovely cadence of Gaelic is eschewed by generations of residents for the tongue of British oppressors.

As with the histories of many subjugated peoples, the Irish protect their heritage through a subversion and conversion of pain into a unique voice.

As Brendan Behan, the playwright and poet proclaimed, "Other people have a nationality. The Irish and the Jews have a psychosis." Behan, a member of Fianna Éireann, the youth organization of the Irish Republican Army, was trained in explosives and well understood the intense brutality of brother against brother. As heinous as the times of the Troubles were, the unrelenting pain of generations of subjugation wends its way into home and hearth. In the case of the Irish, their warfare was always internecine at its roots and the bequest from such a birthright is not unlike our own history of the Civil War. The repercussions of that bitter struggle still echo in the halls of our republic.

And yet, there is a grand beauty birthed by such a history. For the Irish it exists in the achingly exquisite strains of music, the seductive iambs of poetry, the soothing somnolence of Gaelic, the exultant footwork of stepdance, and the extraordinary landscape wrapping all of Ireland's queenly beauty in its lush greenery.

McDonagh's play digs beneath the sod to find the middens of rot and focuses more on the constraint of the upper body in stepdance than on the freedom of flying feet. He parts the misty curtain of rainbows to reveal the bitter resentments that find their way into daydreams. His characters bombard each other with endless barbs that stick to the heart like thistle burrs along the Irish roadways. Charlie Chaplin noted, "Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot." McDonagh takes this a step further by refocusing the lens so rapidly that we trip over our own reactions while traversing the paths of rocky hills, unsure where it is safe to step and leery of both going forward or backward. And his beauty queens sit on thrones of rocking chairs with scepters of pokers wrought in the flames of a special hell where the crown of the Emerald Isle sparkles with a promise always on the edge of human horizons. This is the stuff of tragedy dressed in the tattered rags of comedy. Consider: Heaven may be glorious but the real laughs may be reserved for hell.

Dramaturgical Notes: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*: Murder and Mayhem in McDonagh's Ireland

By Jennifer Madden, Gamm Theatre Resident Scholar

"You can't kick a cow in Leenane without some bastard holding a grudge twenty year."

-Pato Dooley, The Beauty Queen of Leenane

"The inhabitants say and do cruel things merely to keep themselves occupied and to distract them from the feeling the world has passed them by."

-Hugh Brody, *"Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland"*
(1973)

Anglo-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh wrote his first major play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, in 1996 in just eight days, achieving international success and winning numerous accolades, including four Tony awards. *Beauty Queen*, *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) and *The Lonesome West* (1997) comprise the "Leenane Trilogy" of plays depicting the inhabitants of a rural Irish village raising domestic abuse and familial conflict into a grotesquely hilarious high art. With this first trio of plays, McDonagh violently upended folksy expectations of red-haired Colleens, shamrocks and rainbows. Maureen, a lonely 40-year-old virgin (and the titular "beauty queen") lives with Mag, her spiteful horror of a mother, in an empty corner of Western Ireland. The dark romance of the famine and "the troubles" are long past and with nothing to occupy them mother and daughter turn their savage attentions towards each other. What is it about this deceptively picturesque little town that breeds such violence?

Leenane lies in the remote district of Connemara, a region not unlike our own midwest—a "heartland" fetishized as the wholesome locus of authenticity where the supposedly "real" country can be found, but in actuality a place that sees more than its fair share of mayhem and bloodshed. The region is *an Gaeltacht*, primarily an Irish speaking region. Connemara's official website describes it as "the real emerald of Ireland... situated on the very edge of Europe." It is a stunning region with an abundance of natural beauty, boasting sloping mountains, a rugged coastline, peat bogs, and Ireland's only fjord. For the visiting tourist it is a paradise, but for the long term inmates it is hard time in prison with no hope of parole. For them the breathtaking landscape is about as remarkable as faded wallpaper. The land, while gorgeous, is empty, ravaged by famine. The young and vigorous flee as soon as they are able. Work, opportunity, and the future lie elsewhere.

There is a debilitating sameness to the weather. The annual temperature hovers around 50 degrees, raining about every second day, and it is said that the only way to tell the time of year is by the temperature of the rain. In this dank atmosphere, Mag constantly complains about the quality of her Complian, (a powdered meal supplement favored by the elderly and infirm), while watching endless repeats of *The Sullivans*, a dismal 1970s-era Australian TV show. Her pastimes serve as a metaphor for life in Leenane: stagnant, and stale, everything a retread, nothing new or fresh. If this sounds like a tough, gristly meal to chew on don't worry. *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley observed of the original *Beauty Queen* production:

"Sometimes you don't even know what you've been craving until the real thing comes along. Watching... *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the stunning new play from the young Anglo-Irish dramatist Martin McDonagh, is like sitting down to a square meal after a long diet of salads and hors d'oeuvres. Before you know it, your appetite has come alive again, and you begin to feel nourished in ways you had forgotten were possible."

Bon appétit!

ACT IV: Themes and Questions for Discussion

Isolation and Setting

Maureen and Mag are isolated because of their physical location and their relationship with each other. Maureen dreams of being free of her mother's house and small town life in Leenane. She blames her mother and her sisters for her circumstances; however, she is faced with the hard truth that men don't come to call. Farming towns like Leenane were previously communities built on supporting each other, but over time families grew more isolated from one and other, leaving people like Mag and Maureen without the help of friendly neighbors.

- *How would this play and the characters be different if it took place in a city?*
- *How does McDonagh create isolation?*
- *How does the set design of *Beauty Queen* communicate the setting?*
- *In what ways do Maureen and Mag isolate each other?*
- *What role do the Dooley brothers play in relation to the Folan's isolation?*

Parents and Co-dependency

In *Beauty Queen*, though Maureen constantly tries to distinguish herself from her mother, Mag has left an undeniable mark on her and their similarities continue to grow. While there is the external conflict between the two characters, it is exasperated by the frustration that they are so eerily similar. The beauty of the mother/daughter relationship is watching a daughter morph into her mother; however, in *Beauty Queen* Mag becomes an ever-present mirror for Maureen reminding her that if she cannot change her present self, her destiny is laid out before her. Maureen has stayed in Leenane to care for her mother. However, we find out that Mag is also caring for Maureen when she reveals that Maureen

has suffered a mental breakdown in her past and has been released to Mag's care. Mag depends on Maureen but Maureen also needs her mother to give her a sense of purpose, while Mag sees a daughter that is always trying to run away from her.

- *How do Mag and Maureen care for each other?*
- *What keeps Mag and Maureen attached?*
- *How do you think this relationship developed over time?*
- *What is your own relationship with family care-giving?*

The Unreliable Protagonist

Both Maureen and Mag are unreliable protagonists. Maureen is unreliable due to her mental illness and Mag is unreliable, due to her old age and the forgetfulness that comes with it, as well as her deceptive nature. Because what both main characters say cannot be trusted, the audience is in a state of suspense throughout the play.

- *Give some examples of unreliable protagonists that you know of from other plays, books, television etc.*
- *Why do you think writers use unreliable protagonists in their stories?*
- *What parts of this story led you astray?*

Physical and Emotional Abuse

Mag and Maureen verbally berate and emotionally abuse the other and see their own flaws in one another. Both realize that there are aspects of their lives that they cannot change and that they can never leave each other, because they are all they have in the world. Instead of bringing them together, this actually makes them blame the other for their own circumstances which breeds bitterness and animosity.

- *How is their relationship a trap?*
- *In what ways do they rely on each other?*
- *How could this play have ended differently?*

Epilogue

Thank you for joining us for *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and for working with this Study Guide to ensure the best, most comprehensive theatrical and educational experience. Please contact us if you would like us to visit your classroom before or after you attend *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. We hope you will join us for more student matinees at The Gamm. Our education program also provides classes for students in elementary, junior high and high school and our GSI Pawtucket is the thing to do for summer time theatre fun. To learn more, find us on the web at www.gammtheatre.org or reach Steve Kidd at 401 723 4266 ext. 17.

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